

Module 1: Approaches to Learning

Materials Needed

- Copies of the VELS
- Handouts
- VCR and videotapes (optional)
- Flip chart, tape, and markers

Goals and Objectives

As a result of this module, participants will:

Related Northern Lights Core Knowledge Areas

Understand the learning goals and definitions related to children's approaches to learning	Teaching and Learning
Understand how children's approaches to learning develop and change over time	Child Development
Become familiar with the role of adults in supporting the development of children's individual approach to learning	Teaching and Learning Families and Communities
Become familiar with the way the environment supports children to develop an approach to learning	Health and Safety
Increase their skills in observing and assessing how children develop their unique approach to learning	Teaching and Learning Child Development
Be familiar with professional resources and research that addresses children's approaches to learning	Teaching and Learning Professionalism and Program Organization
Be able to explain developmentally appropriate approaches to learning to others, including families	Professionalism and Program Organization Families and Communities



Note Page references to Approaches to Learning domain in the Vermont Early Learning Standards in this module are noted as: "VELS" followed by the page number. For example, VELS Pg. 20. Relevant pages for this module are 5-6, 25, and 30.

Introductions and Opening Activity

- Make sure participants know each other and the instructor, including pertinent information about their work and work settings.

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- Choose an opening activity from the following options:
 - ? Ask participants “Remember a time when you learned something new?” Think about what it was, what helped you to learn it, or who helped you learn it, and what did you feel/experience about yourself in the process of learning it? (Group discussion)
 - ? Break into small groups and learn a simple task together, with instructions (doing a French braid, juggling, a cartwheel, etc.). Share the experience of learning it, refer to questions above. (Small group)
 - ? *Handout 1: Sticks Activity*–What do people experience as they try to unlock the mystery of “the right way to pass”? (Large group)

Review the Standard and Domain

- Review the goals and objectives.
- Use the VELs and review the definitions and learning goals in Approaches to Learning. See VELs Pg. 5-6
- Ask participants, “Why is Approaches to Learning important? Why do you think it is the first domain?”
- Use the opening activity to have participants reflect on the learning goals and definitions of Approaches to Learning: Play; Curiosity and Initiative; Persistence; Self-organization; Reasoning; Application. Ask participants, “What did you see or experience about yourself as a learner during this activity that illustrates the learning goals and definitions?”

The Development of Approaches to Learning

Instructors should use the following key points to develop a mini-lecture on the topic of Approaches to Learning:

A child can be successful in school in many ways, and these ways vary within and between cultures. By understanding the various ways children approach learning, adults can encourage and increase a child's engagement. Curiosity, creativity, independence, cooperation, and persistence are some of the approaches that enhance early learning and development. Specifically, the VELs uses Curiosity and Initiative, Persistence, Self-organization; Reasoning and Application to define Approaches to Learning.

- Children's approaches to learning are powerful predictors of their later success in school and in learning complex skills such as reading and math (Bowman, B., Donovan, M. and Burns, M. editors. 2001. *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.)
- There is considerable variation among children in their approach to learning. Some are due to predispositions like gender, temperament and culture. Others are due to early experiences with caregivers and the environment that can support and encourage an active approach to learning, or can limit and discourage it.
- Children's early experiences with their environment and relationships with adults that support curiosity, initiative, persistence, self-organization,

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reasoning and application contribute to healthy brain development. (Zero to Three National Center for Clinical Infant Programs. 1992. *Heart Start: The emotional foundations of school readiness*. Arlington, VA.)

- Knowing individual children and their unique approach to learning is key to supporting, guiding and instructing them through the learning goals of the VELs. All children deserve an individualized approach.
- Relevant Child Development theory

Erik Erikson: According to Erikson, the socialization process consists of eight phases—the "Eight Stages of Man" (see *Handout 2*). Each stage is regarded by Erikson as a "psychosocial crisis," which arises and demands resolution before the next stage can be satisfactorily negotiated. Satisfactory learning and resolution of each crisis is necessary if the child is to manage the next and subsequent stages satisfactorily. Early childhood stages related to the development of a child's approach to learning are:

- ? **Autonomy vs. shame and self-doubt:** Children learn either to be self-sufficient in many activities including toileting, feeding, walking, and talking, or to feel insecure and doubt their own abilities;
- ? **Initiative vs. guilt:** Occurs during what he calls the "play age," or the later preschool years from about 3½ to entry into formal school. During it, the healthily developing child learns: (1) to imagine, to broaden his/her skills through active play of all sorts, including fantasy (2) to cooperate with others (3) to lead as well as to follow.

Children who are not supported in experiencing initiative may become immobilized by guilt, and display the following: (1) fearfulness (2) hanging on the fringes of groups (3) continuing to depend unduly on adults and (3) is restricted both in the development of play skills and in imagination.

- Links to research in Brain Development
 - ? A child's approach to learning hinges on the interplay between nature and nurture (both innate abilities and early experiences matter).
 - ? Early care and nurturing have a decisive and long-lasting impact on children's development of their approach to learning.
 - ? The human brain has a remarkable capacity to change, but timing is crucial.
 - ? There are times when negative experiences (or the absence of positive experiences) are more likely to have serious impacts on the development of approaches to learning.
 - ? Early attention to providing supportive and encouraging responses to children, combined with an interesting and child-centered environment and appropriate health and safety practices help develop neurological pathways that help rather than hinder children's approaches to learning.

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(Shore, R. 1997. *Rethinking the brain: New insights into early development*. New York: Families and Work Institute.)

What Does Approaches to Learning Look Like?

What does Approaches to Learning look like and how might teachers observe it in young children?

- In small groups or dyads, ask people to come up with specific examples of children demonstrating the Learning Goals of Approaches to Learning. (For instance, think of a child displaying curiosity. What happened to let you know the child was curious?)
- In the large group, select a learning activity from the following three options. Develop questions for participants related to how the adult can support/respond/extend the child's approach to learning. (Instructors may use questions from *Handout 3: Case Study*)
 - ? Have participants think of a group of children they know
 - ? Show a video of young children of assorted ages at play
 - ? Prepare a case study of a child approaching a learning task; include the child's response to the learning task (or use HO #3)
- Allow time to share responses with the whole group.

Reflecting On Approaches to Learning

Select a reflection activity from the list below. Instructors may wish to invite participants to share their reflections with the group, or not.

- Look into the future of a child you know well. How does this child's current approach to learning predict or contribute to his/her lifelong approach to learning?
- Look at your past: how did your approach to learning as a child contribute to how you approach learning today?
- Why is Approaches to Learning important? Why is it the first domain in VELs?
- How do I as a teacher provide opportunities for children to develop the learning goals outlined in Approaches to Learning?

The Adult Role in Supporting this Domain

Break into small groups for this exercise.

- Use segments of a videotape showing assorted adult-child interactions. If a videotape is not available, use the case study in Handout 3 or create your own scenario of an adult-child interaction. Ask participants to notice and record interactions that support or inhibit the learning goals of Approaches to Learning.
- Discuss each participant's observations in the small group. Ask them to use the language of the VELs when describing their observations, and be prepared to back up their assertions with examples from the video.

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- Now, refer to the list in the VELs on Page 6 of what adults can do to support children's approaches to learning. Take each suggestion and amplify it—create a short scenario of an adult demonstrating these qualities in his or her interaction with a child or children.
- Refer back to the opening activity when people discussed a memory of learning something new. What did an adult do to help or hinder your learning?

The Role of the Environment in Supporting this Domain

Stay in the same small groups for this activity. The instructor can lead a short discussion on the definition of “environment”.

Environment includes:

- The physical setting—room arrangement, materials, light, soft and hard spaces, furnishings, clear or cluttered spaces, wall displays, etc.
- Use of time—daily schedule, timing of transitions and routines, amount of time in each part of the day, half or full-day programming, etc.
- Rules and culture—expectations for behavior, extending respect, creating a classroom community, availability and interaction style of adults, etc.

Activity: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Environment

1. Divide participants into small groups. Have each small group choose one of the learning goals and work together to describe ten features of an early childhood environment in the classroom or home that contributes to that learning goal. If a video is used, make references to how the environment supported or thwarted a child's approach to learning.
2. Post 5 sheets of flip chart paper on the wall around the room, each with the following headings: Play, Curiosity and Initiative, Persistence; Self-Organization; Reasoning; Application.
3. In their small groups, have participants go to a flip chart paper and list at least three ways the environment supports a child to develop a healthy approach to learning. Rotate the groups so each subsequent group adds new ideas to the original list. End when the groups are where they started.
4. Make sure each group has a chance to see each completed list.

Reflecting on the Role of the Adult and the Environment

Select one of the following independent writing activity questions:

- What did I do today to support a child's approach to learning?
- Recall a time when I missed an opportunity to support approaches to learning with a child or group. What were the circumstances? What was the child's/group's response? What might I have done differently?
- How does the environment of my program support children's approaches to learning?

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- How can I change my environment to strengthen its ability to support children's approaches to learning?
- Allow time to share with the whole group.

Putting It All Together

Choose from among the following options for this application exercise:

- A reporter is doing an article on the VELS and wants to interview your group about how a child's approach to learning as a preschooler is important for success in later schooling. Have one person take the role of reporter and ask meaningful questions that might be of interest to parents, school boards and the general public. Have the rest of the group answer the questions using what you've learned and already know about approaches to learning.
- Your group is preparing a presentation for parents on how you/your program supports children to develop a healthy approach to learning that lasts a lifetime. Discuss and make key points that you would include in such a presentation.
- Your group is creating a list of recommendations for parents on instilling a lifelong love of learning during the early years. What are the top five things you want parents to know about children's approaches to learning?
- Use the Sandra Stone cartoons in *Handout 4* and *Handout 5* to describe how a classroom environment can be a support to children developing a healthy approach to learning.

Have each small group present their scenario to the large group. Invite comments, questions and words of encouragement.

Conclusion

Instructor's final key points should include:

- From birth, children display the dispositions that enable them to be active learners.
- Approaches to learning are unique and individualized to each child.
- Early experiences lead to development of the brain that can promote or hinder the development of healthy approaches to learning that are predictors of school success in complex tasks such as reading and math.
- Approaches to learning are defined by characteristics of curiosity, initiative, persistence, self-organization, reasoning and application of knowledge.
- Adults in a child's life and the child's environment have a strong impact on the child's approach to learning.
- Play is a vehicle for developing a healthy approach to learning.

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Handout 1: Sticks Activity

Materials

2 sticks about 1 foot long (2 pens or pencils can be used)

Room Arrangement

Participants sit on chairs in a circle so they can see one another.

Time

15 minutes minimum

Goal

To have all participants independently figure out the correct code for passing the sticks to one another.

Instructor

Seated in the circle with the two sticks, the instructor says:

"I have two sticks in my hand. We will pass them around the circle to the next person. There is a "Correct" and a "Wrong" way to pass them to the next person. I will tell each of you if you are right or wrong by saying "yes" or "no." There is to be no other talking by anyone. The game ends when everyone passes the sticks correctly for one full cycle. Again, "no talking please."

The instructor then passes the sticks to the person on the left. People keep passing the stick to the person to the left.

Key for "Wrong" and "Right" ways to pass the sticks:

The secret is in the position of the legs of the person you are receiving the sticks from. If the person giving you the sticks is sitting with her/his legs uncrossed, the two sticks should be passed in a parallel position (I I). If the person's legs or ankles are crossed, the sticks should be passed in a crossed position (X), making sure that the right and left sticks should correspond to which leg is crossed on top (i.e. If left leg is crossed on top of right leg, the left stick should be on top of the crossed sticks when passed to the next person).

Note



Depending on the number of people in the circle, this can take a very long time before everyone figures it out. If time is short, ask for six or seven volunteers to sit in a circle with you while others watch and figure out the pattern. When outside observers understand the code, they can raise their hands to let the instructor know.

If folks don't figure it out after 15 minutes, you, as the instructor, may want to be very obvious about revealing the code (without saying anything) by looking at their legs in an exaggerated fashion before handing over the sticks. Make sure there is ample time, however, for people to either figure it out or get extremely frustrated. If not enough time is allotted, people won't have the important experience of insight into their own approach to learning.

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Handout 2: Erik Erikson–The Eight Stages of Man

Psychosocial crises that demand resolution before the next stage can be negotiated. Satisfactory learning and resolution of each crisis (stage) is necessary if children are to manage the next and subsequent phases with success.

In the period of early childhood covered by the Vermont Early Learning Standards, we need to know about two stages:

- **Autonomy vs. Shame and Self-doubt:** The task of children in this stage is to develop autonomy, instead of a sense of shame or self-doubt. Toddlers who begin to explore and manipulate their environment provoke responses from adults that can be characterized in two distinct ways. If they are praised for their efforts to explore and achieve independence, and adults facilitate their exploration while keeping them safe, children develop autonomy and associate it with positive feelings and self-concept. If children are met with rigid restrictions that prohibit or punish their urge to explore, or if they are ridiculed for lacking competence in the new things they try, they can develop a sense of shame and self-doubt, which serves to further restrict their urge toward independence and autonomy.
- **Initiative vs. Guilt:** The task of children in this stage is to develop initiative, instead of guilt. Children in the preschool years, also known as the play years, create ideas, fantasies and wish to try new things. When adults enjoy this quality, and provide children with opportunities to employ their ideas, they set children up to take initiative and value their ideas. When children's ideas are discouraged or not allowed, they may develop a sense of guilt for having ideas at all, let alone trying to make something happen.

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Handout 3: Case Study

You bring the children to a new playground in the neighborhood to play. The most dominant and appealing piece of equipment is a very large and tall climbing structure with multiple ramps, ropes for climbing, and spiral slides. At the very top of the structure, accessible only by climbing on rope ladders, is a castle-like watch tower that has all the “bells-and-whistles” any child might want to explore.

As expected, the children scream with delight at this new playground piece, run full speed toward it, and descend upon the inviting structure. Most the children scramble their way across bridges and climb the ladders to get to the watch tower. Within a few minutes every child is on the watch tower fully engaged. Every child but one, Kaleem, who stares from the base of the structure at all of the other children having a blast.

Kaleem is an intelligent, sociable, very agile, confident child who typically plays exuberantly and actively with many friends. Despite feeling well, there seems to be something that makes Kaleem act in an uncharacteristic way in this new setting. Then, after about 20 minutes, he quickly scrambles up to the watch tower with ease to join the others.

Questions to consider:

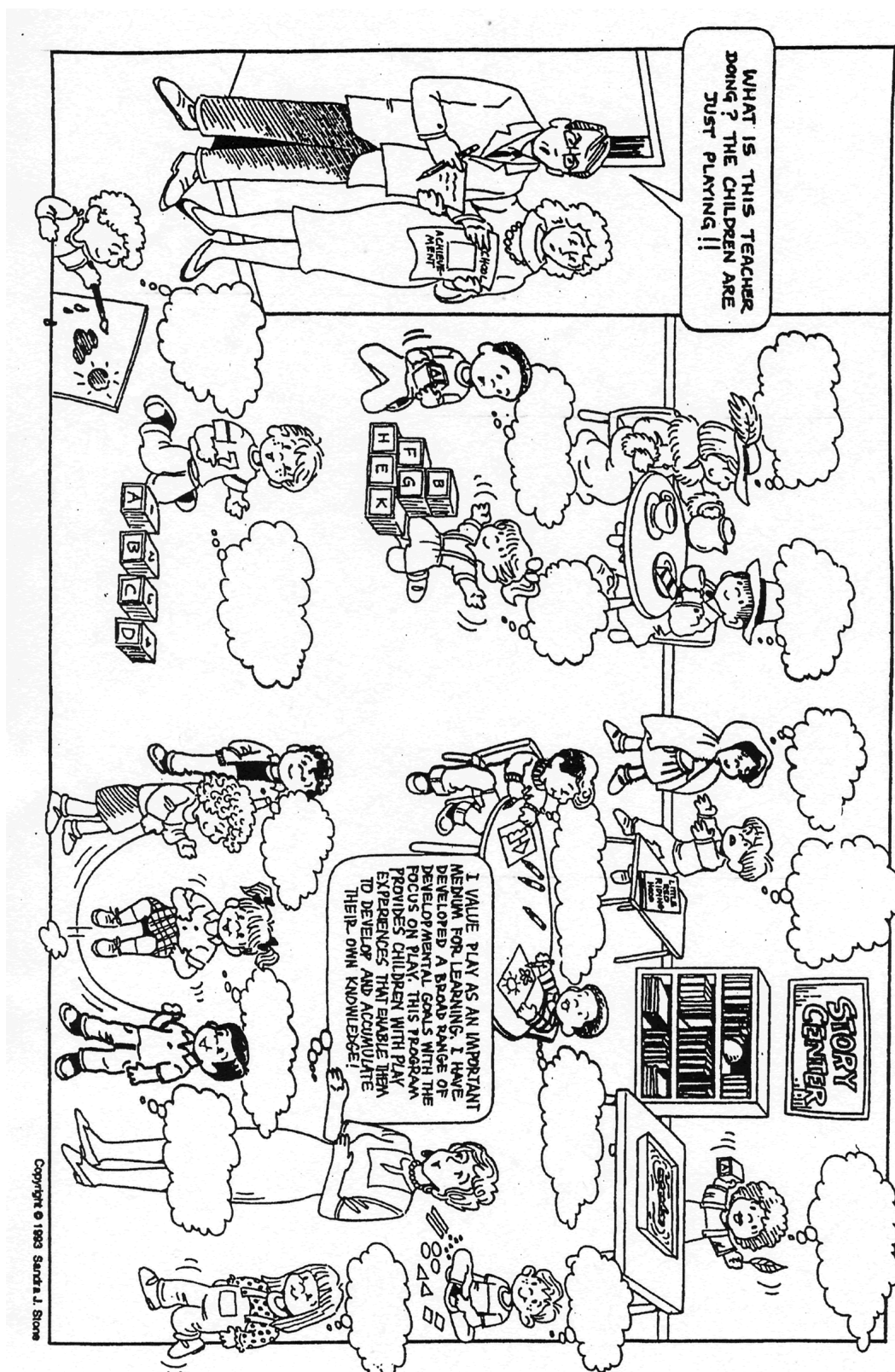
1. How would you describe Kaleem's uncharacteristic behavior?
2. What new things are you learning about Kaleem?
3. How would you respond to Kaleem?
4. What hypotheses are you developing about *why* Kaleem is acting this way?
5. Which early learning standards for Approaches to Learning come into play in your observations and interpretations of Kaleem's behavior?



Note This is an actual event. When approached and asked if there is some reason causing reluctance, the bright child responded “I know I can get to the top of the watch tower but I wasn't sure if I could to get down those rope ladders very easily by myself.”

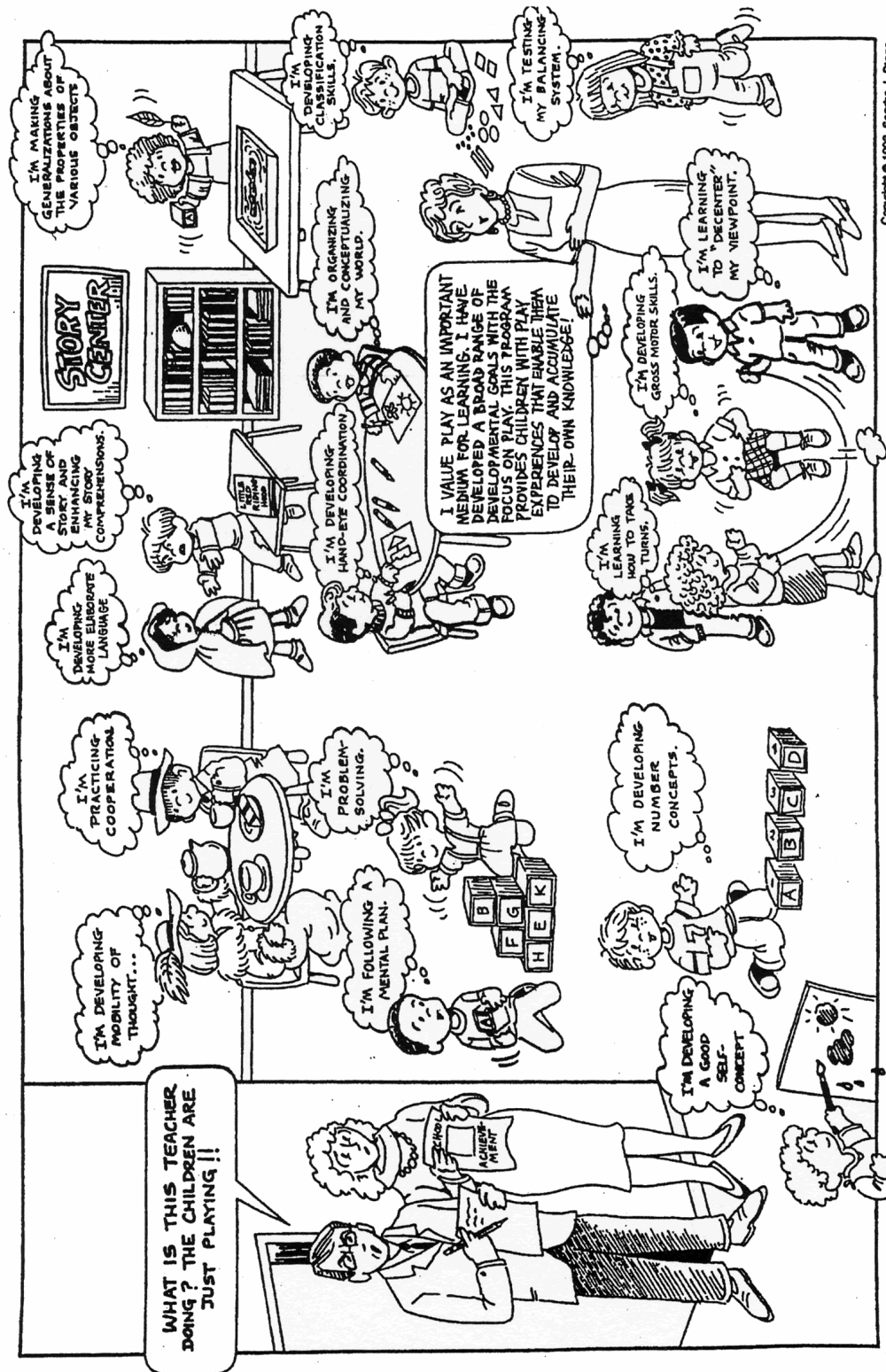
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Handout 4: Sandra Stone Cartoon



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Handout 5: Sandra Stone Cartoon



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Approaches to Learning Professional Resources

Zero to Three National Center for Clinical Infant Programs. Heart Start: The emotional foundations of school readiness. Arlington, VA, 1992.

Bowman, B., Donovan, M. and Burns, M. editors. Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001.

Shore, R. Rethinking the brain: New insights into early development. New York: Families and Work Institute, 1997.

Stone, S. "What is this teacher doing?", 1993: cartoon in the VELS.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Head start leader's guide to positive child outcomes. Washington, DC, 2004

Meisels, S. Work sampling for Head Start trainer's guide. New York: Pearson Early Learning, 2002.

Supplemental Material

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